

Documents Show Ford Promised FBI Data—Secretly—About Warren Probe

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

Gerald R. Ford promised to keep the FBI secretly informed of the activities of the Warren Commission almost immediately after it was organized to investigate the assassination of President Kennedy, FBI files show.

Then the House minority leader and one of the commission's seven members, Ford made the offer in a Dec. 12, 1963, conversation with FBI Assistant Director Cartha D. DeLoach which Ford requested be kept "in the strictest of confidence."

Headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the commission had held its first meeting only a week earlier, on Dec. 5, but it was already embroiled in internal bickering, according to a two-page memo DeLoach submitted to his superiors after the meeting in Ford's office on Capitol Hill. Ford, for one, was critical of Warren, and the House GOP leader reported similar complaints by House Democratic leader Hale Boggs (D-La.) and former Central Intelligence Agency Director Allen Dulles.

Made public this week along with more than 58,000 other pages about the Kennedy assassination from FBI files, the memo by DeLoach continued:

"Ford indicated he would keep me thoroughly advised as to the activities of the commission. He stated this would have to be on a confidential basis, however, he thought it should be done."

DeLoach said Ford, then a Republican congressman from Michigan, "also asked if he could call me from time to time and straighten out questions in his mind concerning our investigation. I told him by all means he should do this. He reiterated that our relationship would, of course, remain confidential."

"Well-handled," FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover jotted down on the report, that additionally assured him that the bureau's relations with Ford over the years had been "excellent" and that the congressman had even been given "an autographed copy of the director's book, 'A Study of Communism'."

A spokeswoman for Ford said he would have no immediate comment.

The Warren Commission, by contrast, appears to have had no comparable insights into the workings of the FBI. In fact, when Ford told DeLoach of "startling information" about the Oswald case that he had just received from CIA then-Director John McCone, Hoover harrumphed in another notation:

"This shows how garrulous McCone is."

The report concerned an alleged exchange of money in Mexico City between Oswald and "an unknown Cuban Negro," which, DeLoach assured Ford on the spot, had already been largely discredited.

The early dissatisfaction with Warren, according to DeLoach's memo, involved what Ford called the Chief Justice's attempts "to establish a 'one-man commission'" by naming one of his proteges, Warren Olney, as chief counsel.

The proposal was headed off, according to a subsequent DeLoach memo, only after "a number of sources" worked "to confidentially brief members of the presidential commission other than Warren, as to Olney's background," which the bureau evidently found objectionable.

As Ford related the outcome to DeLoach, former CIA Director Dulles "protested quite violently" when Warren proposed Olney's appointment at the first commission meeting. By the second session, Ford and Boggs stated their opposition. Boggs was quoted as warning flatly "that he [Boggs] would not work on the commission with Olney."

Former Solicitor General Lee Rankin was named instead, as a compromise choice. He, in turn, was apparently dissuaded by the FBI and others from pressing for his own investigative staff. By Feb. 17, 1964, the FBI files show, Hoover was telling publisher William Randolph Hearst Jr. that not only was Hoover "convinced that Oswald killed the President" but he was also confident "that the commission will ultimately reach that finding."

Another document indicates that testimony before the commission was on occasion carefully coordinated. On May 13, 1964, FBI Assistant Director William C. Sullivan reported that he had just been contacted by James Angleton, the CIA's chief of counterintelligence, about McCone's scheduled appearance before the commission the next day.

"Angleton said it occurred to him that it would be well for both McCone and Mr. Hoover to be aware that the commission might ask the same questions wondering whether they would get different replies from the heads of the two agencies. Angleton wanted us to know some of the things which he believes McCone will be asked and the replies which will be given."

"One question," the memo continued, "will be 'Was Lee Harvey Oswald ever an agent of CIA?' The answer will be no."

Despite such attention to detail, it is sometimes difficult to figure out the FBI's investigative priorities. In a Jan. 17, 1964, memo Hoover, for example, told a top aide to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy that the FBI did not investigate Oswald's alleged killing of Dallas policeman J. D. Tippit "because it was strictly a local crime."

"Our investigation," the memo said, "only touched on those aspects of the crime which related directly to our interest in Oswald and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy."

Contributing to this article were Washington Post staff writers John Jacobs and Ron Kessler and researcher Dennis Rini.

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